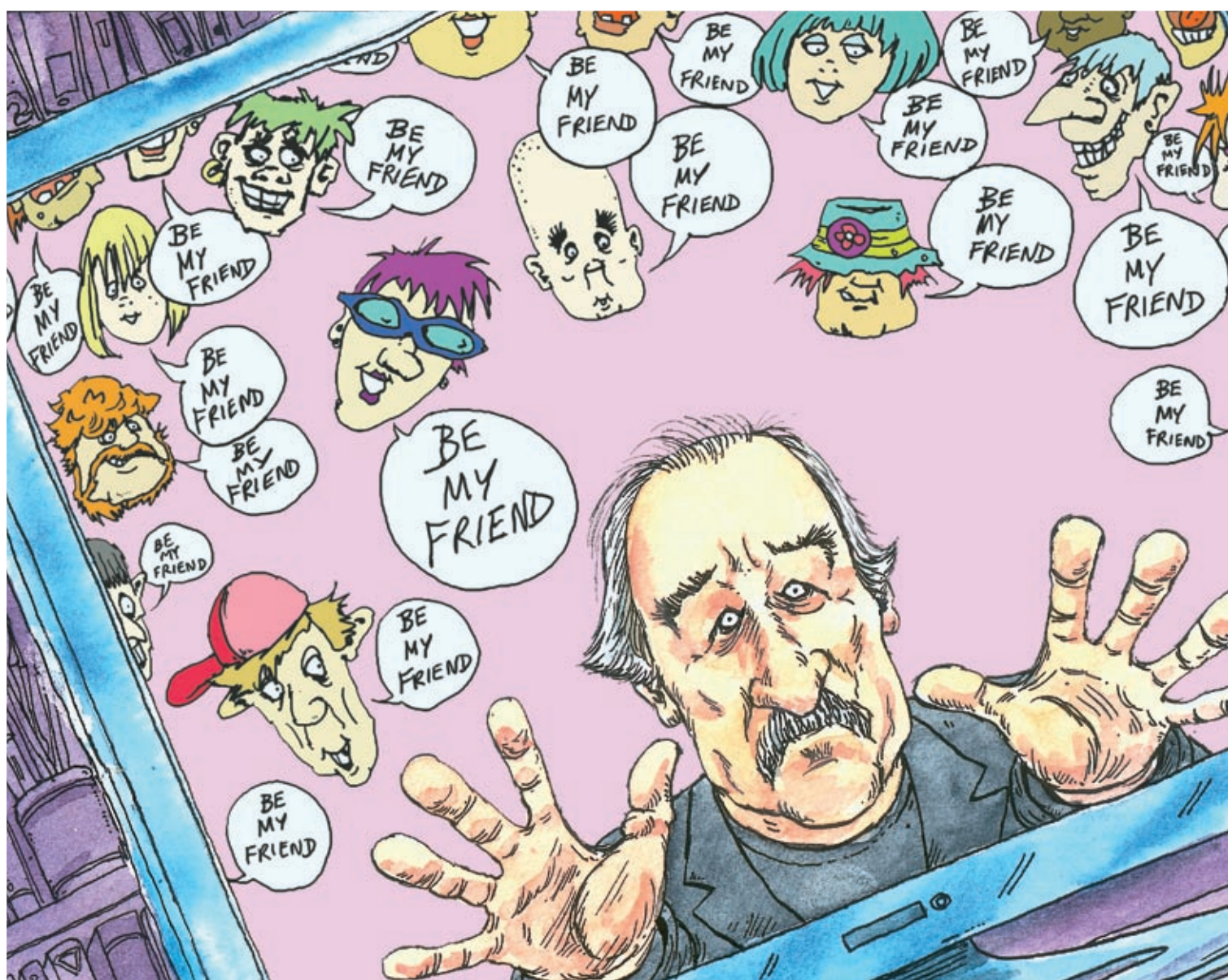




RANTS & RAVES

The world and his wife may be making virtual 'friends' on social networking sites, but you won't find Mel Croucher – or his personal details – anywhere near MySpace or Facebook

MORE AND MORON



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

I come across many thoroughly contemptible people. They can be of any age, gender, faith, politics or nationality, but they all have one thing in common. That thing is the voluntary subjugation of their own personality by technology.

It seems to me that they are hardly capable of existing without an electronic affirmation of their status and popularity. Their camera phone contains hundreds of their

favourite images and film clips. Their digital radio tuner invites them to pre-program a thousand of their favourite radio stations. They have an 80GB iPod, and boast that it can hold 20,000 of their favourite songs. But when I wrestle them to the ground and shove their shiny hardware down their slack-jawed gobs, yelling, "You can only have one favourite, not 20 bleeding thousand," they act as if it is me who is mad, not them.

And now their madness has spread to the ultimate expression of electronic onanism: social networking websites.

A week does not pass without some sad moron inviting me to sign up and become their friend on a network website. I no longer pity them: I despise them. You can almost hear them lisp, "Pwease be my wittle fwiend, pwease!" You can smell their fear of being viewed by others as a failure, if they cannot cajole enough people to declare themselves among the thousands of their extra special, most cherished wittle fwiends.

ANTI-SOCIAL

If you are not quite sure which social networking websites are

frequented by what sort of people, here is a quick synopsis of the three I am most often invited to join. MySpace (100 million subscribers) is for morons; Facebook (30 million subscribers) is for morons with a degree; and LinkedIn (12 million subscribers) is for has-been morons with a degree.

If you're not quite sure how social networking sites work, you are far better off not knowing. It should be enough to understand that these sites have become a powerful and influential part of contemporary culture, and that they rely on peer pressure to enlist more and more morons. Just like claiming to have thousands of favourite images, music tracks or radio stations, it is nonsense to claim thousands of friends online. How many friends do any of us really have? I don't mean family members, workmates, neighbours, acquaintances or people we shagged while drunk, but real friends? Social websites are populated by legions of networking 'friends' who cannot



possibly have more than the most shallow of relationships, and I suspect that most of them have never even met.

MySpace is owned by Rupert Murdoch, the man after whom our greatest television playwright, Dennis Potter, named his terminal tumour. Facebook was launched by the alumni of George W Bush and is worth in excess of \$1.6 billion. As for LinkedIn, the fact that it is an anagram of Dik Linen has not escaped me. But there is another aspect of the lemming-like rush by morons to demonstrate that they have more friends than is humanly possible. When morons embrace these mass networking websites, they lay themselves open to exploitation and danger.

FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

Most people spend time and effort protecting their data, shredding documents and guarding their privacy. They rail against the Surveillance Society, they mutter about credit card fraud and identity

theft, and yet they blithely post photographs and personal details of themselves and their loved ones on these idiotic social networking sites. More than this, they pass public comment and invite public comment on anyone in their over-inflated list of 'friends' without restraint, until such time as somebody else comes along to amend, correct or distort whatever bump and tosh has been posted.

Although he wrote it in the 1950s, Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* is still my point of reference for mass moronic behaviour. Canetti sets out the steps by which different types of mass movements are formed and manipulated. The one that intrigues me most is the 'reversal crowd', wherein the jailer becomes jailed, the powerful become crushed and the willing volunteer becomes the unwitting victim. The masses of the French Revolution formed such a crowd, and those baying for their class enemies to be guillotined were soon guillotined themselves. Thanks to social networking websites, the modern moron can be guillotined several times over.

There is nothing to stop any swindler, pederast or terrorist inviting you to become their wittle fwiend. There is no check on the veracity of any claims they may make about their relationship with you. The more you reveal about yourself, the more you let yourself be exploited. There have been numerous cases of disgruntled morons using social networking sites to damage the reputation of others. Malicious morons can fabricate job applications using real details volunteered by victim morons. It is only a matter of time before terrorist morons cotton on to the fact that they can enlist thousands of unsuspecting morons into fake conspiracies.

Don't be a moron. Don't let your vanity or a lemming mentality result in your personal details and your photograph propagating the planet for anyone else to exploit. I would hate for your door to be kicked in by the police just because one of your wittle fwiends turns out to be Khaled Abdul-Fattah Dawoud Mahmoud al-Mashhadani. But if that were to happen, you deserve everything you get, because you are a moron.

DEUS EX MACHINA



MEL CROUCHER
RAVES

The greatest flop I ever inflicted on the world was almost a quarter of a century ago. I financed it, produced it, designed it, wrote the

script, composed the music, hired the likes of Frankie Howerd, Ian Dury and Jon Pertwee to be in it, and pissed away six months and a small fortune on the world's first interactive movie. It was called *Deus Ex Machina* after a Roman theatrical gimmick, whereby an unlikely gadget is introduced to resolve the plot. My unlikely gadget consisted of a rat turd, so you can probably work out why it was a flop. The fact that you needed an audio cassette player plugged into a 48K Sinclair Spectrum to drive the action didn't help, either.

Nonetheless, the *Deus Ex Machina* has evolved with technology and it is still a damn fine device. In mythical stories, a plot could be resolved by something like a talking statue or a magic flute. Classical plays and operas were often reliant on a sealed document falling into the wrong hands. As soon as the telephone was developed, fictional crooks, cops and lovers were able to drive the plot remotely, down the line. Now we have computers, the best plot resolver of all. Computers can do anything. They are the ultimate gift to the lazy writer, and the lazy writer can use them to resolve any plot they like. They are the ultimate *Deus Ex Machina* because, like the gods of old, they can be everywhere at the same time, omnipresent and all-seeing.

LOSING THE PLOT

I can't face the prospect of producing another mega-flop, but I still come up with all sorts of ideas using computers as the *Deus Ex Machina* for projects I will never complete. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to my bottom drawer, which I gladly open to anyone who wants to rummage around for computer-based plot resolutions. Good luck, and watch out for rat turds.

EYE WITNESS, a TV drama

An innocent man is on the run, accused of murdering his wife two years before, in the Scottish Highlands. She was a secret agent and has framed him. Her colleagues are closing in as he discovers that, at the time of the murder, Google Earth captured him sunbathing nude in Bognor Regis. He zooms in on his time-coded image, and his deformity and tattoos prove his innocence. As the hit squad bursts through the door, the Google Earth satellite refreshes itself.

WIRED, a horror story

A brilliant research scientist identifies a data transfer anomaly, and tracks the source to a vast system of disused tunnels beneath

Bletchley Park. She crawls to the end of the final tunnel to find a rusty jack-plug jammed into an ancient Bakelite socket. Unable to resist, she pulls the plug, thereby crashing every computer in the world. The world immediately descends into barbarity.

IDENTITY CRISIS, a novel

A male novelist joins Second Life as a woman avatar, to research a book about sexual identity. An adolescent boy builds up a relationship with the fake woman and declares his love. The novelist discovers that he likes the boy, but has not got the heart to reveal his true identity. Then he begins to suspect that the boy's avatar is being controlled by a woman, who knows he is really a heterosexual man, or perhaps by a gay man who thinks he is also gay. But how can the boy avatar know details about his private life that only his wife would know? Has he been communicating with his wife all along? Is his wife a lesbian? Is he really a woman? Who gives a toss?

EYE CONFESS, a whodunnit

An aristocrat's last will and testament leaves everything to his bastard son, and is emailed from his laptop to his entire address book, along with a suicide note. The laptop is fitted with retina security. After the aristocrat is cremated, nobody can disprove that he emailed the documents. Until his incestuous sister reveals that his Lordship was dyslexic and dictated his emails to his one-eyed manservant, who is also her son. In other words, the butler did it.

ROMEO AND JULIET, a tragedy

Romeo and Juliet are the next generation of two global network organisations. To the dismay of their parent systems, they fall in love and try to merge spreadsheets. But their software is incompatible, and Romeo kills his hard disk during an upgrade, causing Juliet to download a deadly virus.

RIP-OFF, a reality show

Hopeless social misfits compete for a prize jackpot, judged by Sir Alan Sugar, who is seated on a transparent toilet containing Sir Clive Sinclair. The contestants have to persuade Sir Alan that they can rip off other people's ideas even better than he can. A geeky guy named Bill reckons he can become the richest man in the world by repackaging someone else's computer software under the brand Microsoft.

Sorry. Delete that last one. The concept is too absurd. ☹